CARING ENOUGH TO CARE
October 10, 2004

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PSALM 66:1–12
JEREMIAH 29:1, 4–7
LUKE 9:23–25

"Those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."
Luke 9:24 (NRSV)

Where Jesus is, there is life.
There is abundant life, vigorous life, loved life, and eternal life.
There is life-before-death.

Jürgen Moltmann
The Passion for Life: A Messianic Lifestyle

There is a lot to worry about in your world this morning, O God.
And so we come here to be with you and with each other.
Help us this morning to know again
how deeply and passionately you love this world
and how you want us to love it, too.
Startle us again with that truth
and with the power and grace of your love,
revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In 1971, the legal voting age in the U.S.A. was lowered from 21 to 18, and ever since that time, the percentage of young people who exercise the right to vote has been going down. It is, in my mind, one of the most disturbing trends in this country; the growing number of young people who decide not to vote. Both national political parties are concerned about it; both are devising various strategies to lure young people to the polls in November. Nothing seems to be working, however. Appeals by Madonna, rocker Lenny Kravitz, rapper Russell Simons, the World Wrestling Federation, even an offer of a free Ben and Jerry's ice cream cone have failed to make much of a difference.

What's wrong? Why aren't young people voting? "Too busy to register," Don't have time to learn about issues and candidates," "A sense that my

vote doesn't make a difference" are all offered as explanations. But the bottom line seems to have something to do with caring, with passion.

Albert Lee, an NYU graduate living in Orange County who is not registered and will not vote, put it succinctly: "I don't care enough to care about why I don't care."

Michael Feng, who lives in Manhattan and will sit out the election, adds a helpful perspective: "It's not that I don't care. It's just that I've got more to worry about, like myself" (*USA Today,* 19 August 2004).

To care or not to care; to love or not to love; to be passionate or passive; to get involved enough to risk hurt, disappointment, defeat, or to chose the safety of noninvolvement—that is, and always has been, a fundamental issue, a theological issue, a religious issue at heart.

Sometimes it's a Cubs issue, as some of us learned so painfully this year as the high hopes of April disappeared in the harsh reality of September. When it comes time to order season tickets the check-writer in my house will say, as she does every year, "You're not going to do this again, are you?"

In the reading today from the book of the prophet Jeremiah, God's people are in Babylon, in exile. You hear a lot about the period of the exile because a lot of the most important parts of the Bible come from it and so does much of Jewish and Christian faith and beliefs and attitudes about the world. Judah has been defeated in battle, precious Jerusalem leveled, the holy Temple a pile of rubble. The leadership, the artisans and merchants—all have been killed and the survivors driven across the desert by the Babylonian army. They are living in settlements, refugee camps in Babylon. The situation could not be more grave and hopeless. My guess is that the only way they could figure out how to cope with their weakness and hopelessness was to withdraw emotionally and, insofar as possible, physically from the situation. Find safety in memories of the past, solace and comfort in the old prayers and liturgies, escape from the humility and degradation of their captivity by going inward, escape from the world to the interior havens of the spirit. It is a dynamic as old as history itself, and religion has always been its facilitator. When the world is unbearable, faith offers a comfort and perhaps even an escape.

And so it must have come as quite a shock when one of their prophets, Jeremiah, still back in Judah, wrote them a letter and said, "Build houses, plant gardens, have children, get involved in the world; don't try to escape it." Furthermore—and perhaps this was most shocking of all given where they were living, in captivity—"Seek the welfare of the city, pray for the city, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

Jeremiah wants them to go in the very opposite direction from their instinctive emotional and physical withdrawal, wants them to go into the world, to get involved, to pray for the city, which means to love the city, the world.

That is a radical and defining word. Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall says, “The message of the cross is that the world is beloved of God and must not be abandoned and that the church is the community of faith freed sufficiently from preoccupation with self and institutional survival to seek the welfare of the human city, to resist that which destroys it, and to steward the good within it” (*The Cross in Our Context*).

We resist that. We want in our religion and our church a holy space apart from the profanity of the world, a safe sanctuary, not involvement. We say things like “Religion and politics don’t mix,” “The world out there is too messy, too dirty, too ambiguous, too conflicted and compromised,” “We come to church to get away from all that for a while.”

One of the oldest expressions of that dynamic is the early church traditional legend of *Quo Vadis.* Some of you are old enough to remember the motion picture *Quo Vadis* produced in 1951, starring Robert Taylor, Deborah Kerr, and Peter Ustinov (as the Roman Emperor Nero, who madly fiddled while Rome burned and then blamed it on the Christians). In the legend of *Quo Vadis,* Peter, the apostle, is fleeing burning Rome, where many of his fellow Christians are undergoing the horrors of Nero’s persecution. Peter is moving as quickly as he can along the Apian Way, away from the city, when he encounters an apparition of Christ himself, heading in the opposite direction. “*Quo vadis, Domine*?”—“Where are you going, Lord?”—he asks. Jesus answers, “Into Rome, to be crucified again.”

Peter turns around, according to the legend, makes his way back into the burning city, where ultimately he will be martyred, crucified upside down. (See Hall, p. 54.)

The Judeo-Christian tradition, Judaism and Christianity, at their very best are remarkably world-oriented and deeply involved in and willing to be responsible for the life of the city, the life of God’s world.

But too often the church, Hall says, imitates Peter—heading away from the city with all its dangers.

The church should be the place where the life of the city is passionately cared about, prayed for, and where men and women leave at noon on Sunday to go into the world to make a difference in the name of Jesus Christ. The church should be the place where no child, literally no child, is ever left behind, where concerns of city people, good education, equitable

funding for good education for all children, not just children fortunate to live in the suburbs, health care for the poor, transportation and child care, and safety are priority issues because we are under orders to seek the welfare of the city.

Did you notice that the 1994 Assault Weapons Act, which banned the sale of some—not all to be sure, but some assault-style weapons—quietly expired on September 13? Former Presidents Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton wrote to President Bush and Congress urging the renewal of the ban, reminding the President and Congress that the three of them along with President Reagan had worked hard to pass this law. Mayors and police chiefs all over the country joined in the plea because these military-style weapons are weapons of choice among gang members and drug dealers and paramilitary extremist groups.

It was not a perfect law. But according to ATF data, the incidence of assault weapon use in crimes dropped 66 percent while the law was in effect. The NRA, of course, opposed the ban, vigorously fought it, and in September, it became legal once again, at least under Federal law, to buy an AK-47, Uzi, or Tec 9.

Neither party, neither candidate had much to say about it.

Pray for the city. Seek its welfare.

It is a defining issue for Christians.

In July 1943, a frightened 17-year-old conscript in the German army took cover as Allied bombs rained down on his hometown of Hamburg. He watched as 40,000 people, including many civilian women and children, were killed as a result of the bombing and the firestorm that followed. The young man was genteel, raised in a well-educated, secular German home, and simply didn't think much about religion—or God. But that experience in the bombing of Hamburg and his survival, which he never could comprehend, and then the despair he experienced as a POW had a profound effect on him. He began to ask the fundamental questions: Is there a God? If not, then this horror is the best we can expect from human history and human beings. And yet, if there is a God, what kind of God? Does God know about this? Does God notice? Does God care? Slowly, gradually, Jürgen Moltmann became a Christian, a believer in the God revealed in Jesus Christ, a God so deeply involved in and committed to the life of the world that God's own Son died. It was the passion, the passion of God for the world, that got to him. And so after the war, when he was freed from his POW internment, he enrolled in theological school, earned his doctorate, and became one of the most influential thinkers of our time. Two of his important books are *The Crucified God* and *The Theology of Hope.* At the

heart of his theological thinking is the notion of passion—God's passion in Jesus Christ and our passion, our call from God to love the world and be involved in the world.

Watching the conflagration all around him, the frightened 17-year-old soldier knew the temptation to flee from the world, to abandon the world as a hellish place, to stop caring and hoping and loving. He knew that one of the oldest philosophies in the world was Stoicism, the concept that the best life we can hope for is detached from the world, a life without hopes and desires and loves, a life of perfect apathy—apathia—cool, detached, no love; no anger, no joy; no pain, no hope; no disappointment, no passion; no suffering.

That's very tempting when your world is going up in flames and your friends and family are dying. But no, he thought. In medicine, apathy is an illness. The apathetic person no longer participates in life, no longer cares enough to live; cold indifference takes hold. And that, Moltman reasoned, that apathy seemed to be a sign of what began to happen in the postwar world. He wrote, "One withdraws into a cell, boxes oneself in, locks oneself up in order not to be exposed to suffering, and so passes life by" (*The Passion for Life,* p. 20).

In 1977 Jürgen Moltmann wrote a book, *The Passion for Life,* in which he said, "If we want to live today, we must consciously will life. We must learn to love life with such a passion that we no longer become accustomed to the powers of destruction. We must overcome our own apathy and be seized by the passion for life" (p. 22).

Just last year, Moltmann and his wife, Elisabeth Wendell, a distinguished theologian herself, collaborated on a new little book with the wonderful title *Passion for God.*

Moltmann's conversion to Christianity focused on God's passion, God's passionate love for the world revealed in Jesus Christ. He had concluded that of course God noticed what happened to the city of Hamburg; God loves the world passionately. Of course God cared about the 40,000 people who died, the hundreds of thousands who died in Dresden, London, on battlefields, the 6 million killed in Nazi death camps. God cares because God passionately loves. God suffers every one of those deaths. God experiences the pain of suffering and loss and grief. That's what the cross of Jesus Christ is all about—not God as an abstract philosophic concept but a caring God who loves the world so much as to suffer the death of an only Son; a God who cares about the homeless man who spent the night sleeping on the steps of this church last night, a God who cares about the little children in Cabrini-Green, the lonely elderly woman confined to her apartment, the executive burned out by stress, the couple coping with

boredom and disinterest, the infant lying in an intensive care bed at Children's Memorial, you—whoever you are and whatever you are dealing with this morning—a passionate God.

Jürgen Moltmann is near 80 now. Thinking perhaps of his own mortality, he writes,

> What oppresses us in the hour of death is not the life that has been lived and loved, but rather the life that has not been lived and that has neglected its possibilities. Only the passion of love makes a person alive right down to the very fingertips. (p. 26)

It reminded me of that old vignette that no one has ever been heard to say on his or her deathbed, "My only regret is that I didn't spend more time at the office."

The issue for each one of us is a basic one: how to live my life, how to use the gift of time, how to use the resources I have been given. It's a basic matter; a stance, a posture, a lifestyle. Shall I risk loving others? Shall I risk disappointment and hurt? Shall I love this world and risk suffering and disappointment? Or shall I turn inward, find a safe haven, and worry essentially about myself?

It's the basic stewardship issue: how we manage what we have and who we are. At one level, stewardship is the name we have given to the process by which we raise the money to pay the bills. It is more than that, however. If raising money to pay bills was all that is at stake, a far better and more efficient method would be an annual assessment, dues shared equally, or, as someone quipped, if all you want to do is raise money, raffle a Pontiac.

It's more than that. Your financial commitment to the work of the church is a way you and I can do together what none of us can do alone. I can't tutor the children, but together we can. I can't feed many people, but together we can feed thousands of people. Together we give hope to the discouraged and shelter to the homeless; together we provide consolation to the grieving, nurture to the young, inspiration and encouragement to all who come here. So stewardship is how we help one another be the church of Jesus Christ at its best, in service to the city. The theme this year is "With hearts and hands joined, we are God's servants working together." Hearts—that's the passion part. Hands—that's stewardship.

But it is more than that even. It is a way to express something that is deeply inside each one of us—a yearning to live fully, to be fully alive, to be all we can be and do all we can do for God, to love the world and life itself with a strong and deep passion. And it begins at that place inside each one of us where we decide to care, where, in contrast to the young man who said he

wasn’t going to vote because he didn’t care (and besides had other things to worry about, like himself), we decide to throw caution and worry and anxiety to the wind and live for God.

I love something the late Thomas Merton once said:

> In an age when there is much talk about “being yourself,” I reserve to myself the right to forget about being myself, since in any case there is very little chance of being anybody else.

The Christian secret, the miracle Jesus promised is that in caring, caring enough to care, in passionate love for the world and for others, in deciding to live each day out of that passionate love, we find our deepest self—our true self—“in a kind of forgetting of self.” We discover our best and truest self, the self God created us to be. (See Thomas Long, *Testimony*.)

> “Those who want to save their life will lose it,” Jesus said, “and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Amen.